

A Study of the Relationship between Learning Belief and English Achievement of Chinese English Major College Students

REN Hulin BAI Yulian

Department of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University
 2 Beinong Road, Beijing, 102206, China

Abstract

It is generally accepted that learning belief has great effect on learning, however, few studies examine the extent to which learning belief affects related achievement. This paper mainly discusses the study of relationship between learning belief and English achievement of Chinese English major students in College. Through the data analysis of Horwitz's BALLI and TEM4 scores, we tested on 100 English major students in college, which was focused on the correlation between learning belief and learning achievements. Based on this, a further study was made on influencing factors such as student's personality, learning motivation, aptitude, teachers and learning participators on students' English learning belief and achievements. The results show that the relation between learning belief has a general positive effect on learning achievement, but not determinative; personality plays important role in learning belief; aptitude and hard work are able to produce high scores; good achievement students are driven by both integrative and instrumental motivation, teachers and the classmates have mutual influence on learning achievement. The study is very important as it provides implications for college English language teaching and further help to improve students' English proficiency.

Keywords: English majors, learning beliefs, English achievements, TEM4

1. Introduction

English, as a second language learning is popular across the world. Chinese students began their English courses in the primary school generally, some even in kindergarten. After the national entrance examinations, Chinese students go to university for further study, and English is a required course for all of them. After years of English learning, many Chinese students of them cannot achieve satisfactory results. Especially, for English major students, although some of them have a great desire and a strong belief to study English, their proficiency is relatively low in college (Zhang Fei, 2011). Therefore, questions rises, why some students have strong learning belief but cannot gain their ideal scores in college? To be more specific, research questions are as follows:

1. Is there a difference between learning beliefs and English achievements for English majors' student?
2. If yes, what make the difference? Are there any other factors influencing learning beliefs and their achievements? What are they and their implications for second language teaching?

The above questions are significant both in theoretical and pedagogical reasons: on one hand, theoretically, the second language learning is a large field of linguistic study, while the studies of the relation of second language learning beliefs and the achievements of the English majors is relatively little and need be further improved. On the other hand, pedagogically, this will offer the English teachers in China a better understanding of the internal organism of the English major students who study English and have a promotion in English teaching quality (Gao Wei, 2007).

Learners' beliefs do not have a very, clear, accurate and all-accepted definition in second language study. Many scholars of second language study have recognized the difficulty of defining learners' beliefs, and some of these scholars have been regarding beliefs as a "messy construct" (Pajares, 1992, as cited in Barcelos, 2000). While learning achievements seem to be an abstract item, which means the act of achieving or performing, likes a successful performance or an accomplishment in doing something. In this paper, learning achievements mainly refer to English proficiency of the English major students. To quantify this variable, in this paper, it will be summarized to the scores of the English professional courses at school, like TEM4 scores, for testifying students' English learning achievements.

The structure of this paper firstly gives a brief introduction about the research background and explanation important items. And then in the second chapter will give a detail literature review, which includes former foreign and domestic scholar's researches. Then thirdly this paper will give its research methods and approaches, telling the means the research uses. Chapter four will be the core of this paper. It will score the questionnaire and analyze the data. Finally, the last chapter will give a conclusion.

2. Previous studies of English learners' belief and achievement

In the earlier study, the categorization of learners' beliefs about language learning here was mainly based on the categorizations by Horwitz (1999) and Wenden's study. (1986a). Horwitz (1999) made the language learners' beliefs into five categories: (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations. Wenden

(1986b) classified students' beliefs about language learning in three areas: (1) use the language (beliefs stressing the importance of actively using the language, especially speaking and listening), (2) learn about the language (beliefs pointing to the need to learn about grammar and vocabulary), and (3) the importance of personal factors (beliefs emphasizing the role of personal factors). Horwitz (1999) and Wenden (1986b) got their different results in the study the language learners' beliefs out of different ways and perspectives of measurement. Other than the differences, there are also overlaps of the classification. (Gao Wei, 2007).

According to Lu (2013) college students' learning beliefs is a multidimensional structure, which is based on the beginning of knowledge, including essence belief and motivated belief of the subjective belief in the whole system. College students have a positive belief in general, but different groups exists differences, because the mechanism of action is quite complicated. Good learning beliefs can conduct study and practice effectively. The research also found that sexual, grades, schools, family backgrounds, studying achievements all the factors that influence the learning beliefs.

Some scholars have researched and confirmed that the learning beliefs and their grades have a positive correlation. Schumer (1990, 1994) studied that the learning belief has an effect on learner's information processing system and learning achievements. Hofer (1994) has also accepted that internal motivation, self-efficiency, self-control, and academic achievements have a positive correlation. They started the point at a macroscopic view and the subjects of the research are learners. Kim & Kellert's (2010) results indicated that there were negative trends in learners' attitudes towards mathematics except for the group receiving belief change strategies with personal. There were also negative trends in participants' study habits except for the group receiving motivation, volition and belief change strategies with personal messages. No single group over any other showed improvement in achievement.

Zhang (2011) studied the correlations between the English majors' Learning beliefs, their learning strategies and English proficiency. His research can be concluded that learners have beliefs of how language is learned. These beliefs guide the learning strategies, which have direct influence on their achievements. Zhang (2005) pointed that in mathematics' study, the belief of learning speed and the belief of knowledge source have an influence on mathematics' learning activity and achievements. He focuses on the research of the students' learning belief of math study and found out the difference between middle school students, high school students and graduates' learning beliefs. And what is the effect on learning behavior and achievement.

As shown above, some studies investigated the relation of learning strategy and learning beliefs. Other studies are on the students' learning belief or learning achievement without explicit the subject of study. This paper will narrow the subject to make it more precise.

3. Research Methodology

This study mainly takes qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the relationship between learning belief and achievements. The quantitative method is to get diverse factors, meanwhile, it also helps to set an overall structure that testify learning belief of the students, safely and efficiently. To be authoritative and reliable, this paper will refer to Horwitz's "Belief about Language Learning Inventory" paper, BLLI for short. BALLI contains 34 items to assess language learners' beliefs regarding the following five aspects: (i) Foreign language aptitude, (ii) the difficulty of language learning, (iii) the nature of language learning, (iv) learning and communication strategies, (v) motivations and expectations

We modify the BALLI to make it more suitable for study. For example, give out 100 students test paper, according to Horwitz's BLLI, making them answer questions such as *if you spend one hour a day studying English, how long do you think you can success?* Students are asked to read each statement and indicate (a) Strongly agree, (b) agree, (c) neither agree nor disagree, (d) disagree, (e) strongly disagree.

In aiming to make a comparison between the data of learning beliefs and learning achievements, this paper is going to collect English major students' TEM4 results in college to reveal the degree of students' learning achievements. The English achievement test is designed according to the Full-time Senior English major students in Li Ren College, including their listening, vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension test.

Besides questionnaire, we had an interview to 12 English major students who are in the different level of English proficiency. The form of interview is oral interview, we prepare several questions, and also some are came up unanticipated. These two kinds of way of collecting materials make it a good way to do this research, which is called semi-structured interview, which designs the questions in advance, and during the interview, according to students' answers, the interviewer can make some complements and modification. In this way, the interview can get rich content, and have an all-sided acquaintance. In this section, the performance of speaking competence involved in interview questions, which is collected by asking their average scores in foreign teacher's lesson of two semesters.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The large-scale examination and survey was carried out among 100 college English major students in Li Ren College in April 2015 through papers and e-mails. Through questionnaire, this study gets the concrete data of students' learning beliefs. And through English achievement paper test, the result of students' achievements can be seen from data analysis. We gave out 105 questionnaires and received 100 questionnaires back from the e-mails and some gave the notes of the questions. The results can be seen in table 1. It shows the results that most of the English majors have a positive learning belief, since most of the questions are chosen more "a", "b" than "c", "d" among the 100 English major students. Table 1.1,1.2 reviews the results of the questionnaire. PS, question7 and question 12 are two reverse items. To make the research more precise and clear, we had an interview toward 12 English major students who are in the different level of English proficiency, presenting the data in the following tables.

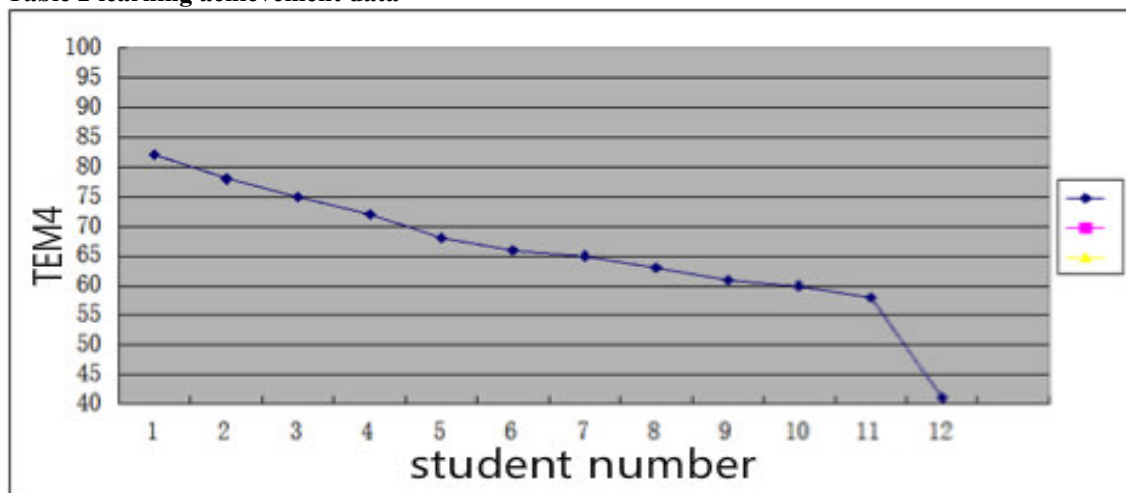
Table 1.1: Questionnaire results

Question	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
A	37	33	6	18	59	43	0	38	45	14	52	0	27	21	74
B	50	65	35	74	7	37	1	22	26	43	35	3	59	17	12
C	11	1	54	8	20	12	20	15	24	13	20	31	13	30	3
D	2	0	1	2	1	5	19	10	3	20	2	12	1	24	5
E	0	0	10	0	3	3	60	5	2	10	0	63	0	8	6

Table 1.2: Questionnaire results

Question	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
A	42	20	14	41	10	62	15	29	65	38	9	52	13	20	37
B	21	17	9	30	31	21	32	15	13	9	5	24	32	33	48
C	26	10	7	25	25	2	7	25	6	18	46	5	28	41	7
D	7	35	42	4	24	17	46	28	13	30	36	24	23	3	2
E	4	18	28	0	10	0	0	3	3	5	4	0	5	3	6

Table 2 learning achievement data



The author collects the English majors' students TEM4 scores for the study of their English achievements, and shows in the table 2, which is on a declining curve. The students 1-12 make an order by their score so that make this table more clear to analyze. The sequencing of No.1—No.12 students is based on their achievement score order. In the following table 3 shows these 12 students' learning belief data.

Table 3 learning belief data

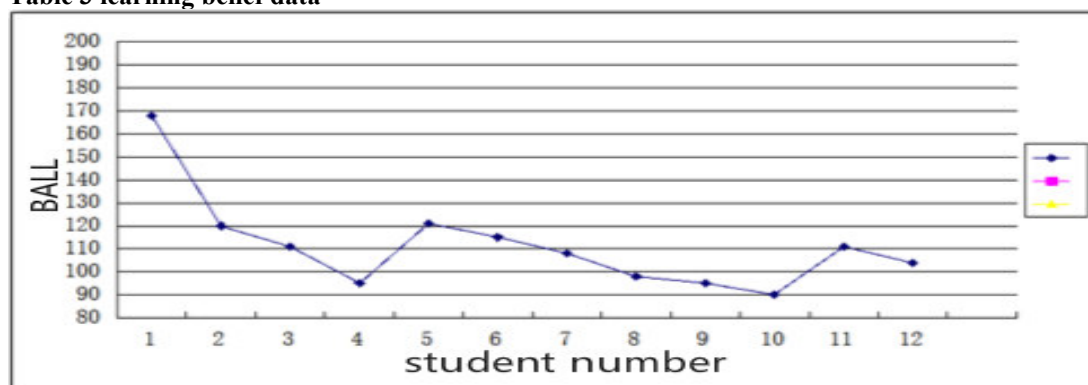
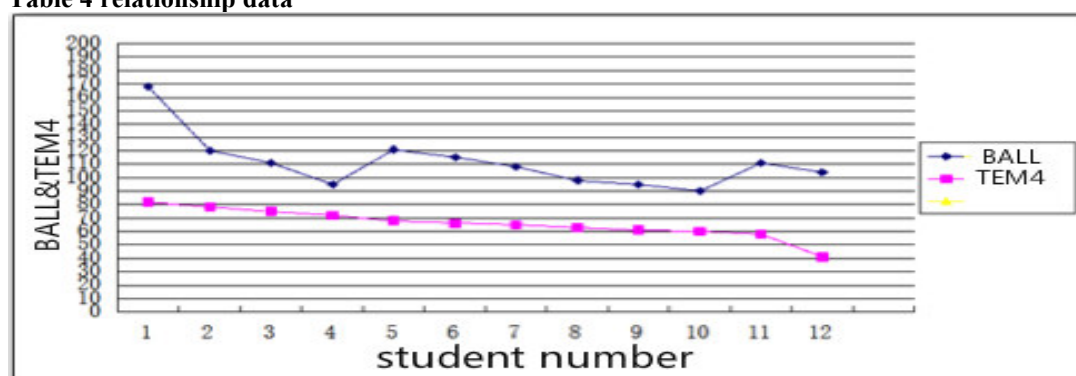


Table 4 relationship data



12 English major students are as a group of sample with the questionnaire scores, presenting their learning belief degrees. The score is higher what the belief is stronger. Table 3 shows an irregular line chart so that the author combines table2 and table3 together, making it clearly for audience to understand the relationship between English majors' learning belief and English achievements.

The overall trend goes from the high score to the low, which means the general correlation is positive, that is, when the English majors have a strong belief, their learning achievements achieve better proficiency. But unexpectedly, at the stage of students4-5, we can see some differences, the Student 4 got a relative high score in TEM4, but it shows a sudden decline in the curve graph, which presents relatively negative learning belief, and student 5 raise up the data of BALLI. And in the interview, student 4 is a very modest and cautious student. Another unexpected factor is student 11, which is opposite from the case above and makes a negative relation between learning belief and achievement. He has a low score in TEM4, but with a relative strong belief than others. So what makes it different? In the further analysis, this paper will figure out the influencing factors on English students' learning belief through questionnaire paper and the interview.

Through the interview, we found aptitude is positive in students' learning belief and achievements. In the questionnaire No.1: 1. *Some people are born with a special ability, which helps them learn a foreign language.* Average score of the subjects got in these items is: 87 participants (87 % of the total 100 participants) got the average score over 3 points, which means they thought language aptitude was important to language learning, 11 participants (11% of all) were neutral for the importance of language aptitude, and 2 participants (2% of all) got less that 3 points, that is, they disagreed with the role of language aptitude in English learning.

In general, almost all of the English major students involved in this study has a positive attitude, whether the English achievement is good or bad. Because in the result of questionnaire, the question: "I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak English very well". Over 70% students choose "a" and "b". They have faith to study English well. However, in the former study, indicating that a very modest student who has a high TEM4 score get a relative low BALLI score. And later from the semi-structured interview, the author found student 4 is very steady and sure. She made everything in her control, answering questions and things logically and orderly, her attitude toward study is cautious. Therefore, although her belief is presented not strong enough, she has a successful result.

Another factor to explain why some second language learners are more successful than others is individual motivation. These external factors can be concluded in social context factors, which influencing second language learners' learning belief and achievements primarily on attitude and opportunity. Social context has many aspects, but in this study, the subjects are college students, so the background will be limited to

teachers and classmates influence. Another role that is considered to be important to the successful language learning is the language learners themselves. This factor may influence the students' learning belief and achievement as well. Good partners study together and encourage each other to be good learners.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to find out the relationships between Chinese English major students' learning beliefs and influencing factors of English achievements. Firstly, we can see that the students' English learning belief is generally strong. Secondly, the correlations between aspects of learners' beliefs and learners' English achievements were positive, and the greater the students' belief is, the higher score they can get, but they are not totally consistent. In the further study, language aptitude indeed functions in English achievement. Personality is also influencing learning belief and learning achievements, modest and cautions students have lower learning belief though their achievement good. The introverts and the extroverts can make a difference in English learning achievements. English major students driven by both types of motivation make a more successful achievement than those who are only driven by instrumental motivation, although English major students tend to be driven by instrumental motivation.

Teachers and study partners also have influence on English learning included in the social context factors. The influence is primarily on learners' attitude and opportunity. The comprehensive teaching quality and the teachers' individual personality will have an effect on the popularity by students, and then influence students' learning belief and achievement. Partnership can also have an effect on students' English learning as well, even more important than teachers' impact. In consideration of relatively small number of subjects, this study needs to be further verified. As English major students are 15 students, the conclusion should be cautious. The further study can be based on this paper, broaden the range of the subjects and then have a detailed analysis toward these influencing factors, analyzing with professional data analysis tool, which may have further results.

References

- Barcelos, A.M.F (2000). Understanding teachers' and students' language learning beliefs in experience: A Deweyan approach [D]. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama.
- Cotterall S.(1995). Readiness for autonomy: Investigating learner's belief [J]. *System*, 23(2), 22-28.
- Gao Wei (2007). The relationship between Chinese college EFL learners' beliefs and English achievements. A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.A. in English. School of foreign languages Southwest University, Chongqing, China
- Horwitz, E. K. (1999). Cultural and situational influences on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning: a review of BALLI studies. *System*, 27(4), 557-576.
- Hofer B K, Pintrich P R. (1997). The Development of Epistemological Theories: Beliefs about Knowledge and Knowing- and Their relation to Learning [J]. *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 61-69.
- Kim & J. M. Kellert. (2010). Motivation, volition and belief change strategies to improve mathematics learning, [J] *Journal of computer-assisted learning*, 3(1), 42-51.
- Lu Lijun (2013). An Empirical Research on Learning Beliefs of College Students in China, Doctoral thesis, Xiamen University, Xiamen, China.
- Muriel Saville-Troike, M. (2008). Introducing second language acquisition. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 81-93.
- Schommer, M. (1994). Synthesizing epistemological belief research: Tentative understandings and provocative confusions [J]. *Educational Psychology Review*, 6(6), 11-23.
- Schommer, M. (1990). Effects of beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning among post-secondary students [J]. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(1), 33-41.
- Wang Bing. (2013). Study of the Relations of the Learning Process and Learning Outcomes in Chinese Students of English, Northeast Normal University, Jilin, Changchun, China.
- Wenden A. L. (1986a). Helping language learners think about language [J]. *ELT Journal*, 40(1), 3-12.
- Wenden, A. L. (1986b). What do second-language learners know about their language learning? A second look at retrospective accounts. *Applied Linguistics*, 7: 186-205.
- Zhang Fei (2011). A study of the Correlations between the English majors' Learning Beliefs, Their Learning Strategies and English Proficiency. Foreign Languages school of Changchun Normal University, Jilin, Changchun, China.
- Zhang Wenwei (2006). A study of math's learning belief among junior college, normal colleges and universities, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China
- This paper was supported by Beijing Social Science Key Planning Project Fund (2015BJ0122).